

Handout A-2

JEWISH LIFE IN POLAND

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Even before the establishment of the first Polish kingdom in the tenth century, Jewish merchants visited Poland in the course of their journeys. While the very first settlers came from the east in the tenth century, the earliest large-scale migrations to Poland, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, were from the west. Most of the settlers fled from German lands and Bohemia during the Crusades and the period of the Black Death. They were followed by Jews who sought asylum in Poland and other countries after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492-1493.

Unlike the largely peasant Slavic populations, the Jews were city dwellers and skilled craftsmen. They also were experienced in trade and fiscal matters. Polish kings and princes, who welcomed the contribution the Jews could make to Poland's economic development, encouraged them to settle and offered them protection.

With the unification of Poland and Lithuania in 1569, the newly formed Commonwealth extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and included within its boundaries Poles, Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, and others. Jews, who had taken part in the early development of towns and cities in Poland proper, now played a major role in the colonization of the outlying areas of the Commonwealth. Active in local commerce, they also exercised a virtual monopoly over entire branches of national and international trade, for example, timber and hides. Many were

employed as tax collectors and as stewards of estates and industries belonging to the nobility, including salt mines, mills, and the production and sale of alcoholic beverages.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Golden Age of Polish Jewry, the Jews enjoyed relative freedom within the feudal structure of Poland. They could travel inside and outside the country, engage in a variety of occupations, and practice their religion and self-government. These rights, which were basic to their way of life, depended on privileges granted to them by the generally sympathetic kings and nobility. However, pressures from the townspeople, their economic competitors, and from the clergy, who objected to their faith, forced even tolerant rulers to place restrictions on the place and manner in which Jews might live. Individual cities were at times granted the privilege of *non tolerandis Judaeis*, which meant that Jews could not live within their limits. Sometimes Jews were compelled to live within designated areas within the towns. They were also banned from various spheres of economic and social life.

Jews were resourceful in coping with such restrictions. When they were excluded from city markets, they engaged in foreign trade. If they were forbidden to live in cities, they settled in nearby towns. Most important, their communities developed a form of self-governing, administrative organization, the *kehillah*. Institutionally complete and autonomous, the Jewish community had its own schools, hospitals, courts of law, and welfare organizations. From ca. 1580 to 1764, local Jewish communities were subject to the Council of the Four Lands, the supreme authority regulating the communal life of Polish Jewry.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the end of the Golden Age of Polish Jewry. The country was weakened by war and internal conflict. In the years 1772-1795, Poland was parti-

tioned and absorbed by neighboring Austria, Prussia, and Russia, who were to dominate her for almost one hundred and fifty years. The Jews, like the rest of the population, were divided among these three countries, in which they confronted economic, political, and cultural conditions very different from those they had known before the partitions. Even though during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries radical changes increasing secularization, development of modern industry, emancipation – took place, basic patterns of Jewish settlement, communal organization, and occupation persisted up until the eve of World War II.

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In old Poland, legal restrictions almost entirely denied Jews the right to own land and to hold even minor positions in the Polish government bureaucracy. The majority of Jews were employed in urban crafts and commerce. Banned from the Christian guilds, Jewish craftsmen organized their own guilds, which were under the jurisdiction of the local *kehillahs*.

Later, it was hard for Jewish workers to find employment in big factories. They were entirely banned from certain industries, for example, railroads and mining. Besides, they themselves were reluctant to enter the large-industry factory system; among other reasons, the requirements of the Jewish Sabbath made it impossible for them to comply with the six-day work week. Most Jews continued to work in small workshops, owned and operated by themselves or other Jews, or in a system of cottage industry, much as they had done for centuries.

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Handout A-2 (cont.)

From the thirteenth century to the eve of World War II, Jewish merchants and artisans played a special role in the economic life of Poland, which was primarily an agricultural country. Jews were represented in almost every craft, from tailoring and shoemaking to metalworking and smithing. In some occupations – hatmaking, manufacturing of sewing notions and trimmings, brassworking, gold- and tin-smithing, glazing, and the manufacture of fur and other garments – even after World War I, they constituted from seventy-five to one hundred percent of those employed. In these trades, as in baking and butchering, they served both Christian and Jewish populations. Within the Jewish community they were the sole suppliers of baked goods, meat, and garments, inasmuch as these products had to be prepared in accordance with religious law.